

Exploring English as a Second Language Learning Experience of Chinese Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

This article has two objectives: 1) To explore the levels of English learning experience (L2 learning experience) as a second language within the framework of second language learning motivational system (L2MSS) among male and female postgraduate students in a Chinese university. 2) To explore whether there will be any differences in terms of English learning experience within L2MSS framework among male and female Chinese postgraduate students. Scores of the 5-points Likert Scale are conducted to identify mean scores; standard deviation (SD), and an independent samples t-test were employed to analyse the quantitative data. The convenience sampling technique was employed for semi-structured interviews of 10 postgraduate students. The qualitative data was analyzed to triangulate and mix with quantitative data findings, and the data was interpreted by using thematic content analysis. The overall findings demonstrated that the L2 learning experience level among male postgraduate students was moderate ($M=3.26, SD=0.90$), while the levels of L2 learning experience among female postgraduate students were high ($M=3.74, SD=0.80$), and there were some differences among male and female postgraduate students in terms of L2 learning experience ($t=-5.25, p=0.00$). The findings could give graduate students appropriate support in terms of gender difference among Chinese postgraduate students. Furthermore, the findings draw more educators and researchers towards paying more attention to second language acquisition in the Chinese educational context.

Keywords: *English language learning motivation, L2 learning experience, Male and female postgraduate students, Chinese university*

Introduction

With the increasing internationalization of the English language and globalization, English has gradually become a world language, a veritable planetary lingua franca (Martinović, 2018). In the meantime, with China's economic rapid development, China has received significant attention as a global superpower. Subsequently, all English learners witness increasing research on English language learning under China context. Within the Chinese system, the nature of education is extremely exam-oriented. Meanwhile, English is one of the most important subjects for all Chinese students and a significant subject in the university entrance examinations (Taguchi et al., 2009). Under this situation,

English teaching and English learning face a significant challenge since students' learning motivation has been ignored under the Chinese exam-oriented system. Without motivation, English language learning will increase students' learning pressure and restrict students' learning effectiveness (Zeng, 2011). According to the interviews of several English graduate teachers in China, more and more graduate students are not motivated to learn English since learning English is only a way to pass stressful exams for graduate students. Therefore, studying English as a foreign or second language for Chinese postgraduate students has become progressively more crucial. Thus, the learner's learning experience is the core which is able to determine the results of learner's language learning.

Based on Dörnyei (1998), motivation is the fundamental impetus to acquire a second or foreign language and motivates to sustain the tedious phases of the long-term learning process. Deci and Ryan (2008) also offered their insight on motivation, saying that motivation can facilitate learners to achieve their language learning goals and gain more valuable worldviews about the current social environment. Due to the limitations of the traditional theory of motivation under the global environment, it is essential to redefine second language motivation. Therefore, Dörnyei (2005) reformulated motivation in a broader perspective and proposed the "second language motivation self-system" (L2MSS) theory which is based on the "self-discrepancy" and the "possible self" theory. L2MSS includes three components: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. Ideal L2 self means students desire to achieve their ideals and reduce the gap between reality and the ideal self. Ought-to L2 self refers to some characteristics that learners think they should have under the influence of their surroundings. L2 learning experience refers to the specific learning environment and past learning experience. L2 Learning Experience as one of the essential components within the framework of L2MSS, which refers to situational motivations closely related to the specific learning environment and past learning experiences, such as the influence of teachers, peers, learning experience, and curriculum experience. Furthermore, Chinese graduate students lack a learning environment since they do not have much chance to communicate in English in their daily life. Therefore, some students have negative emotions toward English learning. Chinese educators should pay more attention to students' motivation since motivation is a crucial element in English language learning for graduate students. English learning experience plays a vital role in graduate students' English learning and academic achievements for postgraduate students. The empirical research on this theory has been chiefly carried out in other countries, where its validity and reliability were ensured (Al-Shehri, 2009; Csiz-er & Kormose, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al. (2009). Specifically, Taguchi et al. (2009) investigated Chinese learners whose ages ranged from 11 to 53, with a mean age of 21.1. The findings show how learners' motivation is influenced by specific context and surroundings. In that case, the English learning experience of graduate students should be further explored to provide more valuable suggestions on Chinese graduate students' English learning.

Since L2MSS was proposed in 2005, it has attracted more researchers to explore its framework of L2MSS. Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan (2015) indicated that the L2MSS is the most prominent and fundamental theoretical framework in the language field. They clarified that the dominant framework in the second language learning field is the L2MSS theory. They also demonstrated that the L2MSS framework could be applied and adapted to different theoretical orientations and perspectives. Liu (2019) pointed out most of the selected samples in the research of China are mostly low-level learners: primary school students, middle school students, and high school students. Meanwhile, graduate students have received significant attention from Chinese society with the expansion of academic enrolment in China. Subsequently, there has been some research about L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS in China. However, some research has been done on undergraduate Chinese students, but not much research on graduate students in China (Zhu, 2019). Zhu pointed out L2MSS theory still lacks the support of sufficient empirical research in the Chinese context. Since there is still not much research based on the Chinese context, Liu (2019) calls for more research in China, which can further verify L2MSS theory in Chinese culture and background. Zhu (2019) also raised it is necessary to fill the gaps in the graduate students' level within the L2MSS theory. Thus, the current study on second language learning motivation focus on L2 learning experience based on the L2MSS theoretical framework focus on postgraduate students in a Chinese university.

To analyze the levels of L2 learning experience among graduate students in China, there is an inevitable factor to consider, which is gender differences. Most researches had been conducted on gender differences in three main stages: the social-psychological stage, the cognitive-situated stage, and the process-oriented stage. Whereas, there are not many researches on the stage of L2MSS in terms of gender difference. Since the L2MSS theory has been proposed, the related research of gender differences has been gradually investigated, which revealed a significant difference between male and female second language learners. According to the earliest research by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Bacon and Finnemann (1992) found the similar results: male learners had a weaker integrative motivation comparing with female learners. However, the results did not always remain the same within the theoretical framework of L2MSS. For instance, Henry (2011) conducted a study to explore the relationship between second language learning motivation and different genders; The finding testified that there were no significant differences in learners' motivation with different genders. Subsequently, Sylven and Thompson (2015) found a similar result under Swedish high school educational background, which claimed there was not much difference among female and male learners in their learning motivation. Furthermore, Thompson and Erdil-Moody (2016) investigated gender differences among university students in Turkey, which revealed that there were also no significant differences between male and female students.

On the contrary, Zhu (2017) explored the differences of male and female students in minority middle schools in China, which showed a significant difference within the L2MSS framework in terms of L2 learning experience. Meanwhile, Lu's research (2019) also significant differences among high school students of different genders within the framework of L2MSS. The research showed that the L2 learning experience of girls is significantly higher than that shown by boys. Similarly, Chen (2019) explored the relationship between gender difference and the research results highlights that female students' L2 learning experience outcome is significantly higher than that of male students.

Base on all of the different findings of different gender, the differences in terms of L2 learning experience of different genders among graduate students need to be further explored. To fill the research gaps on L2 learning experience of L2MSS among male and female postgraduate students, this study attempts to conduct research in China among male and female postgraduate students. By exploring the levels of L2 learning experience among female and male graduate, the findings suggested more teaching strategies to improve their motivation based on the gender difference, since individual difference is very important in the process of English learning. Investigation into the motivational theory proved to be a better tool for scholars to focus on, enabling them to explore more variables, which gave us a better understanding of the motivational system. Analyzing language learning motivation stimulated graduate students to fully utilize their potential learning abilities under the Chinese educational context. To some extent, it also gave great significance to academic-level teaching methodology in terms of English teaching and English by fully understanding the L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS among male and female graduate students.

Research Question:

1. What are the levels of the L2 learning experience within L2MSS framework among male and female graduate students in a Chinese university ?
2. Are there any differences in terms of L2 learning experience of L2MSS among male and female Chinese graduate students ?

Literature Review

L2MSS Theory

The second language motivational self-system (L2MSS) was proposed by Dörnyei (2005) to explore second language learning motivation. L2MSS is a combination of individual features and second language learning, which also presents the significance of second language motivation. According to Dörnyei, L2MSS is a new concept for second language learning, which can be

connected with self and identity theory. He believes that second language learning is a communication tool and an essential part of an individual learning personality. Thus, Dörnyei firstly proposes the concept of 'self' in second language motivational theory. Dörnyei claimed that learners' main motivation to study English is to acquire global identity. The concept of self and identity receives more and more attention in the field of second language learning motivation. English learners' second language motivation is not just to integrate into the target community but also to express international posture in the global world by using English as a lingua franca. According to Ushioda (2006), the notion of international posture extends the scope of the external reference group, which makes English language users consider the community as a nonspecific global community instead of a specific geographic, linguistic and cultural community. □ □ □

Overall, the L2MSS theory broadens the scope of second language motivation theory in various learning environments. Based on this theory, more and more research has been done by applying this theory in the foreign language motivational research field as well as psychological research (Dörnyei,2009).

L2 Learning Experience (The Main Contents of L2MSS) □

Dörnyei (2005) claimed that the second language motivational self-system has three main components: the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. The third component is not generated from the future self guides, which is associated with the classroom atmosphere and former learning experiences. Therefore, the proposed third component of L2MSS the language learning experience.

L2 Learning experience means motivation related to learners' learning situations and experiences, such as the influence of the tutors, the curriculum, as well as the learning experience. The critical point of an L2 learning experience is to employ a great executive impact and a mediating influence under effects of future self-guides (Papi, 2010). As Dörnyei (2009) indicated, the purpose of mastering a second language is not generated from internal or external self-images for some language learners but from the actual language learning process. For example, a sample item from the L2 learning experience is "how do you feel about your English classrooms?" .

Relevant Previous Studies of L2 learning experience within L2MSS framework

Using questionnaires among postgraduate students, Liu (2010) examined the L2 learning experience. Chinese researchers have widely adopted his questionnaire since it has acceptable validity and reliability. His research proved that postgraduate students' second language motivation is validated in the theoretical framework of L2MSS. Therefore, the theory of L2MSS can be applied to Chinese postgraduate students for their second language learning.

From the views of self-dimension, most of research demonstrated that the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self are more influential on second language learning motivation. Still, the L2 learning experience has fewer effects on learning motivation. Liu (2012) researched the relationships of three components of L2MSS, English anxiety, and learning behavior by applying a questionnaire; the participants were postgraduate students. The research results clarified that the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self have a strong relationship, whereas students' English anxiety can be reduced by contributing to a positive learning experience. However, Liu, Yao, and Hu (2012) explored the relationship between 3 dimensions of L2MSS, English anxiety, and learning behavior among postgraduate students. The finding revealed that a positive L2 learning experience has a significant function in reducing learning anxiety.

In order to better understand the sociocultural function of English learning motivation, Kim (2009) designed a case-study to analyze the L2 learning experience of adult students from Korea. The case study's findings proved learners' learning experiences in various communities could provide a strong foundation for establishing a strong learning motivation. Prasangani (2015) conducted a crucial survey with 361 undergraduate students from Sri Lanka within the framework of L2MSS in order to explore the influential factors of English learning motivation. The findings indicated a significant

correlation between social goals and L2 learning system. Subsequently, Peng (2015) found out that there is a close relationship between the three components of L2MSS, international posture, and intended efforts in English learning. The research indicated that the ideal L2 self could be directly impacted by the L2 learning experience. Meanwhile, international posture can be significantly influenced by the L2 learning experience. Furthermore, the ideal L2 self is less influential on learning intended effort, while the L2 learning experience significantly impacts on intended effort. □

From all the research mentioned above, L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS has been investigated under different backgrounds and cultures since L2MSS was proposed. However, the findings of the influence of L2 learning experience did not always remain the same result. Overall, second language learning motivation still deserves to be further explored in terms of L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS in China among postgraduate students.

Relevant Previous Studies of gender differences within L2MSS framework

Massive research has been conducted on gender differences, and this happened in three main stages: social-psychological, cognitive-situated, and process-oriented. During the development of the L2MSS theory, the related research of gender differences has been gradually investigated, which revealed a significant difference between male and female second language learners. For example, the earliest research by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Bacon and Finnemann (1992) found similar results: male learners had a weaker integrative motivation than female learners. However, the results did not always remain the same within the theoretical framework of L2MSS. For instance, Henry (2011) conducted a study to explore the relationship between second language learning motivation and different genders; the participants were 6 to 9-grade young learners from Sweden. The finding testified that there were no significant differences in learning motivation between different genders. Subsequently, Sylven and Thompson (2015) found a similar result under Swedish high school educational background, which claimed there was not much difference among female and male learners in their learning motivation.

Nevertheless, some studies were conducted in China, showing significant differences between male and female learners (e.g., You & Dörnyei, 2016; You, Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2016). The research mentioned above claimed that male learners have weaker learning motivation than female learners. Zhu (2017) also demonstrated the gender differences in different regions and grades in a minority middle school in China, and the findings indicated a significant difference between male and female students regarding L2 learning experience within the L2MSS framework. Furthermore, Lu (2019) presented a research that indicated that the L2 learning experience of female students is significantly higher than male students. Similarly, Chen (2019) explored the relationship between the L2 learning experience of L2MSS among female high school students and male high school students with Chinese educational backgrounds. The study also demonstrated that female students' L2 learning experiences were significantly higher than male students. Therefore, the differences among male and female postgraduate students in terms of L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS represent the issues that need to be explored further in future research.

According to the above-mentioned studies, the investigation's findings - such as Thompson and Erdil-Moody's research in Turkey and You and Dörnyei's research in China - differed under different educational backgrounds and cultures. Thus, the investigations related to gender differences in terms of L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS still need further exploration among postgraduate students under Chinese educational system. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the L2 learning experience with varying genders within the theoretical framework in Chinese context.

Methodology

The research design of the current study was an explanatory mixed-methods research design. According to Creswell (2003), the primary purpose of this design is to employ qualitative data to help explain or build upon initial quantitative results. The explanatory design is a two-phase mixed methods based, while collecting and analyzing quantitative data is the first phase, followed by the subsequent collection and analysis of qualitative data. Secondly, the qualitative phase of the current research is conducted and connected to the results of the first quantitative phase. Since this design begins quantitatively, investigators emphasize quantitative rather than qualitative methods.

The quantitative study was conducted by employing a 5-level Likert Scale questionnaire to collect quantitative data from the participants. The purpose of the quantitative study was to explore the L2 learning experience of L2MSS levels of Chinese graduate students; and to explore whether there will be any differences in terms of L2 learning experience of L2MSS between male and female Chinese graduate students under the China context

The quantitative study was conducted among 354 postgraduate students. Thus, the weight was on quantitative (QUAN) data. After completing the quantitative data survey, the qualitative (Qual) study was conducted with ten postgraduate students. A semi-structured interview was conducted with respondents to mix the findings with quantitative data in the qualitative study. Furthermore, all information gathered was at one point in time.

Context of the Study

This study on second language learning motivation based on the L2MSS theoretical framework focuses on postgraduate students in Tianjin city, China. The background of the population of this research can be presented as follows. They were all postgraduate students from a university in Tianjin, one of the top universities in China; there were 4,434 graduate students in the year 2020. Founded in 1895, the University is the oldest institution of higher education in China's modern history. Its 125-year history is the epitome of the progress of modern Chinese higher education, embodying the Chinese people's indomitability through challenging times. The university has been a pioneer in several fields during its growth, spanning three centuries.

There are 20 programs for postgraduate students. Postgraduate students have been learning English since primary school. English is a mandatory subject for every undergraduate student who wants to study for their master's degree.

Population and Sample

As for quantitative part of the current study, this research employed a convenience sampling technique. The convenience sampling technique is typically employed by collecting data from a conveniently available pool of participants. It is the most commonly adopted sampling technique, which is incredibly prompt, uncomplicated, and economical. According to Babbie (1990), although convenience sampling is less desirable than probability sampling, it can provide the ability to generalize to a population. Thus, this research employed convenience sampling. The population of this study was postgraduate students from Tianjin University, China both male and female postgraduate students. The postgraduate students have to complete 2.5 or 3 years of the curriculum by 2020, and there are 4,434 postgraduate students in total. For the quantitative study, the sample size for 4,434 rounded up to 4,500 as suggested by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) when sampling error is less than or equals to 0.05 and reliability equals 95% is 354. Therefore, the sample size of this study was the first 354 postgraduate students, including 174 male Chinese graduate students and 180 female Chinese graduate students who completed the questionnaire and submitted it by Google form from one university in China. The participants' major is not limited to any particular major, such as arts, education, psychology, or business.

For the qualitative part of the current study, the purposive sampling technique was applied. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasize the notion of saturation for reaching a proper sample size in qualitative research. The qualitative sample size should be large enough to conduct enough data to provide more information to address research questions. According to Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994), the sample size of the qualitative study was around 6 to 25. Therefore, the qualitative data was collected from 10 postgraduate students participants. Considering this study's second research question, five male and five female postgraduate students were purposively selected from the first top 5 programs (foreign language and literature, business management, maths, electronics engineering, education) in terms of the number of students in the most extensive programs to explore the gender difference in terms of L2 learning experience within the L2MSS theoretical framework qualitatively.

Research Instruments

This research applies quantitative and qualitative instruments, namely a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Questionnaire

The English version questionnaire of this study was adopted from Chen (2018), and was designed based on the comparative research of Taguchi et al.'s comparative study among Chinese, Japanese, and Iranian learners of English (2009) and Liu (2010)'s study of L2MSS of English learners in China (2010). Liu's questionnaire was mainly designed for postgraduate students in China with acceptable content validity and reliability. Liu's study explored the motivation among Chinese graduate students. Therefore, the objective of the current study is the same as Chen's in terms of Chinese postgraduate and L2MSS; this study adopted Chen's questionnaire. The questionnaire aims to examine the levels of L2 learning experience of L2MSS with different genders in the Chinese context among graduate students. According to Lin (2008, p.67), fitting indices meeting the requirements of various appropriate index criteria can prove that the instrument has good validity. The questionnaire used in this research has good validity since the validity of this adopted questionnaire has been confirmed by Liu (2010) by testing various fitting indexes. Cronbach's alpha reliability should be over 0.80, confirming that the questionnaire is reliable (Wu,2010). This present study did find the reliability again since the adapted questionnaire has its reliability, and the reported results are presented in Table 1.

Table1: Reliability of the Questionnaire by Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
L2 learning experience	0.937	7

The questionnaire contains seven items of the L2 learning experience. This study was adopted from Chen (2018), which was designed based on the comparative research of Taguchi et al. (2009). The questionnaire aims to examine the levels of the L2 learning experience of L2MSS and gender differences among postgraduate students in the Chinese context. These 7 items represent participants' attitudes toward second language learning related to the specific learning environment and past learning experiences, such as the influence of teachers, learning experience, and curriculum experience. For instance, "I really enjoy learning English." The following table 2 presents the questionnaire items.

Table 2: Questionnaire Items

Domain	Item
L2 Learning Experience	Q1:I like the atmosphere of my English class.
	Q2:I really enjoy learning English.
	Q3:I feel time passes faster when I am learning English.
	Q4:I always look forward to English lessons.
	Q5:I find learning English very interesting.
	Q6: I hope there will be more English classes.
	Q7: I like the process of learning English, and I think it is interesting.

According to the Likert scale, this part of the questionnaire's formation has five typical levels: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neutral; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree. Therefore, the evaluation criteria of this study is based on a range of scores of 0.80. Thus, the formula of evaluation criteria is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Class interval} &= \frac{\text{The highest width} - \text{The lowest width}}{\text{The width of class}} \\ &= \frac{5 - 1}{5} = 0.80 \end{aligned}$$

The evaluation criteria are as follows:

- 1.00-1.80 means the level of the L2 learning experience of students is 'very low.'
- 1.81-2.60 means the level of the L2 learning experience of students is 'low.'
- 2.61-3.40 means the level of the L2 learning experience of students is 'moderate.'
- 3.41-4.20 means the level of the L2 learning experience of students is 'high.'
- 4.21-5.00 means the level of the L2 learning experience of students is 'very high.'

Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted in English with postgraduate students from a Chinese university. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (1993), the semi-structured interview is a verbal questionnaire conducted to acquire specific answers from the participants by using a series of formal questions. The semi-structured interview were adopted from the study of Chen (2018) to obtain qualitative data. The semi-structured interview used in this research had been proved to have validity. Therefore, the present study will not need to find its validity again.

The objective of the semi-structured interview in the current research is to mix qualitative data with quantitative data to gain more insightful information. The interview questions as well as objectives are shown in the following Table 3.

Table 3: The Interview Questions and Objectives

No.	Interview questions	Objectives
1	Concerning the three components of L2MSS, what are the main forces for your learning English?	To explore the levels of L2 learning experience of L2MSS of Chinese graduate students in China (To fix the finding with research question 1).
2	How do the three components of L2MSS influence your English learning motivation and your motivated learning behavior?	To examine gender differences in terms of L2 learning experience (To mix the findings with research questions 2).

Collection of Data

As per the design of this study, quantitative and qualitative data collection methods are presented. This part presents the procedure of data collection for both methods. The research was conducted after receiving the approval of the university’s superintendent and the university’s endorsement.

Data collection method of questionnaire

The following steps are presented for data collection of the questionnaire:

Firstly, the questionnaire generated a QR code; the QR code was given to a supervisor of the postgraduate students.

Secondly, the supervisor gave the QR code to all postgraduate students.

Thirdly, the students completed the questionnaire via Google form. The total administered time was around 8 to 12 minutes.

Lastly, the researcher collected the questionnaires via Google form.

Data collection method of interview

The researcher, with 10 participants, carried out the semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted in an easy and comfortable atmosphere at the participants’ convenient time, and it lasted for about 20 minutes through one-to-one discussion in English. The interviews were recorded by means of digital recording device.

All participants were given assurance that the provided information was exclusively going to be used for the purposes of the mentioned research (including participants in questionnaires and interviews).

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis for research question 1: This question aims to explore the level of L2 learning experience of L2MSS among graduate students in China. Scores of the 5-points Likert Scale are conducted to identify mean scores and standard deviation (SD).

Quantitative Data Analysis for research question 2: This question aims to explore whether there will be any differences in terms of L2 learning experience within L2MSS between male and female Chinese graduate students in China. The current study applied an independent samples t-test to testify the research question.

Qualitative data analysis for research question 1 and research question 2 : The qualitative data was analyzed in order to triangulate and mix with quantitative data findings. Interview results are interpreted by using thematic content analysis. Coding procedure and thematic content analysis were applied to analyze the data obtained during the semi-structured interview. Answers were categorized under each key concept and quantified for the data analysis. The quantified qualitative data applied was aimed at providing data interpretation in order to support the quantitative data and find discussions. The researcher and one rater coded the information from the interview independently to ensure the reliability of the inter-coding process of qualitative data. The Pearson correlation was employed to find the correlation between the two data sets. The correlation value of 0.81, ensured inter-coder reliability between the two data sets.

Research Results

Research Question 1

The quantitative data was collected from graduate students in a Chinese University to reach the first research objective. By analyzing the quantitative data, the research findings are reported as follows.

To address the first research question: What are the levels of the L2 learning experience of L2MSS of Chinese graduate students in China? The descriptive statistics of graduate students' L2MSS are reported in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Student's L2MSS Level

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Interpretation
L2 learning experience (male students)	174	1.10	4.60	3.26	0.90	Moderate
L2 learning experience (female students)	180	1.15	5.00	3.74	0.80	High

According to the evaluation criteria, it was found that the level of the L2 learning experience among males is moderate. In contrast, the levels of L2 learning experience among female postgraduate students are high. Furthermore, the qualitative findings of the first research question were classified into one theme: The positive impact of learning context.

Table 5 presents the qualitative findings of the first interview question mixed with the first quantitative results.

Table 5: Mixing Data of Levels of the Three Components of L2MSS

Quantitative Results	Mixed with Qualitative Results
High level of the L2 learning experience	Theme: The positive impact of learning context

Male and female students mentioned or expressed that the L2 learning experience is their main force in English learning. Table 3 presents the frequency and percentages of the first interview of male postgraduate and female postgraduate students.

Table 6: Frequency and Percentages of the First Interview Questions

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
L2 learning experience (male students)	5	45%
L2 learning experience (female students)	6	55%

According to table 6, 5 or 45% of male students mentioned or expressed that the L2 learning experience motivated their English learning. Moreover, 6 or 55% of female postgraduate students mentioned or expressed that L2 learning experiences are their main forces in English learning.

Research Question 2

To address the second research question: are there any differences in the L2 learning experience of L2MSS among male and female Chinese graduate students in China? A T-test is utilized to examine the differences among male and female Chinese graduate students regarding the L2 learning experience. The findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 7 :Independent Samples t-Test of the Differences of L2 Learning Experience Among Male and Female Chinese Graduate Students.

Domains	Gender				Levene's test for equality of variances		T	df	Sig (2-tailed)
	Male (174)		Female (180)		F	sig			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD					
L2 Learning experience	3.26	0.90	3.74	0.80	4.13	0.04	-5.25	343.93	0.00

*p <= 0.05

From Table 7, significant differences are revealed in terms of L2 learning experience: the level of male's L2 learning experience (Means=3.26, SD=0.90) is lower than the level of female's L2 learning experience (Means=3.74, SD=0.70).

The quantitative results showed a significant difference in L2 learning experience within the framework of L2MSS between male and female Chinese graduate students in China. In contrast, the level of males' L2 learning of L2MSS is lower than that females.

Furthermore, The qualitative results (the second question) also examine the impacts of the L2 learning experience on English learning motivation and learning behavior, in order to mix with the quantitative findings. Subsequently, four interviewees expressed that a positive learning context can inspire their learning motivation during the interview. Therefore, the following contents were expressed during the interview.

"I feel more comfortable when English classes are based on the real world, especially when much importance is given to business English, even when the classes are generic." (Student#6 male)

"I always felt that improving my language skills by introducing specific topic-related vocabulary was a great help. In this sense, we are lucky that information on all topics is widely available for free online. This also makes it easier for the teacher to provide good learning material for us. It is beneficial for my English learning and stimulates my learning motivation." (Student#7 female)

"There is less and less pressure for learning English after I got in university. Teachers normally provide guidance on English learning instead of pushing students into learning English." (Student#8 female)

"Maybe I was fortunate, but I always felt that my teachers were good at finding teaching material that made classes interesting and engaging. Whether videos, PowerPoint presentations, readings, or music, I think the most important factor is to keep students focused and never turn the class into a boring series of notions. Modern teaching techniques seem to have found effective solutions to this." (Student#9 female)

To conclude, the interviewees expressed that the positive learning context motivates their learning motivation, and that English class and teachers greatly influence them toward English learning. Moreover, three female students and one male student admitted the positive impact of learning context on English learning motivation.

Table 8 presents the qualitative findings of the second interview question mixed with the quantitative results.

Table 8: The Qualitative Findings of the Second Interview Question

Quantitative Results	Mixed with Qualitative Results
The level of females' L2 learning experience is higher than males' L2 learning experience.	Theme: English learning can be motivated by a positive learning context (1 male, 3 females)

The classified answers to the second interview question are presented in Table 9 with frequency and percentages.

Table 9: Frequency and Percentages of the Second Interview Question

Categories	Frequency of male	Percentage of male	Frequency of female	Percentage of female
L2 learning experience	1	25%	3	75%

According to table 9, 1 or 25% of male students mentioned or expressed that the L2 learning experience positively influences English language learning. In comparison, 3 or 75% of female students mentioned or expressed that the L2 learning experience positively influences English language learning. Overall, the frequency and percentage of the L2 learning experience among female students are higher than in male students.

Research Discussion

The Significant Role of Learning Context

One theme in this section is closely connected with a high level of L2 learning experience among Chinese postgraduate students within the theoretical framework of L2MSS, which is consistent with the quantitative results.

The findings show that the L2 learning experience among Chinese postgraduate students is highly associated with a theme that could be described as “the significant role of learning context”. Concerning this theme, the findings indicated that more female students expressed a positive learning experience, while male students were less motivated by the L2 learning experience. Creating a better learning context can positively impact postgraduate students' English learning, closely associated with the L2 learning experience. The findings also align with Csizer and Kormos's (2009) findings, which indicate that the L2 learning experience can motivate students' learning behavior. Additionally, the empirical research on this theory has been chiefly carried out in other countries, where its validity and reliability were ensured (Al-Shehri, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al. (2009). Specifically, Taguchi et al. (2009) investigated Chinese learners' motivation, finding that it is significantly influenced by specific context and surroundings.

Furthermore, teachers, peers, and class materials significantly impact their English learning. For postgraduate students, they have more optional classes instead of compulsory classes. As a result, they can choose their preferred learning material or subjects; the learning environment is better and more favorable for postgraduate students. Moreover, this is also consistent with Liu (2010), a large-scale investigation was conducted among Chinese students, which demonstrated learners' L2 learning experience can usually predict their English learning outcomes.

In summary, the influence of L2 learning experience within L2MSS framework can be found among Chinese graduate students in China.

Difference among Male and Female postgraduate Students in terms of L2 Learning experience

Female students are more likely to be more favorable toward language learning compared with male students related to learning motivation. Chen (2019) pointed out that female students are more likely to be more optimistic than males in second language learning. Female students are more motivated to communicate with native speakers and participate in classroom activities than male students. Lu (2019) also proved significant differences of different genders in terms of L2 learning experience. The research showed that the L2 learning experience of girls is significantly higher than that of boys. Due to female students' different characteristics, female students usually are better at thinking and memorizing, and they tend to believe that goals can be possibly accomplished through hard-working. Thus, claiming that female students' L2 learning experience is at a higher level than males' seems to be a reasonable statement.

According to the findings of this study, female' L2 learning self is at a higher level than that of male students. A reason is that female students are more sensitive and emotional than male students. In contrast, female students are more likely to be influenced by external factors, just like the pressure of scores and parents. Still, male students are also under the pressure of parents and scores. The reason is that all Chinese students are under the influence of the Chinese educational system, which is a solid external influence. The study's findings indicated that female students' L2 learning experiences are

higher than male students, which is consistent with the findings of Zhu (2017). In addition, Zhu's study explored the differences between different genders of students, which proved that female students' L2 learning experience is higher than that of male students. Chen (2019) examined the relationship between the L2 learning experience among female high school students and male high school students with Chinese educational backgrounds. The study also demonstrated that female students' L2 learning experience was significantly higher than that of male students.

Furthermore, female students tend to a more positive emotional approach to the regarding the L2 learning experience. Thus, female students are more interested in learning English. Meanwhile, Dörnyei & Csizér (2005) also pointed out that female students are more motivated by future selves since female students tend to imagine themselves as native speakers who talk freely in daily life with English. Moreover, male and female students have different requirements in terms of the classroom environment and setting. Female students tend to have more aspiring feelings about the current classrooms and teachers. Female postgraduate students expressed a strong interest in English learning due to their positive emotions towards L2 learning. However, male students require a more relaxed classroom atmosphere than female students. Male students prefer to study English in a comparatively free and comfortable environment.

Limitations of The Study

Despite its possible useful findings on Chinese postgraduate students within the framework of L2MSS, the current study has some limitations.

First, the study sample focused only on postgraduate students at a university in China. Therefore, this research's findings only represent this target group of Chinese postgraduate students instead of the whole group of postgraduate students. Secondly, although a valid sampling procedure, the quantitative method of conducting questionnaires could not fully explore students' actual motivation. The findings of self-reported high motivation could be attributed to the drawbacks of using the self-report questionnaire. Thus, it is possible that their self-reported high motivation was not translated into real learning motivation. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted using WeChat voice calls instead of face-to-face, which is not comprehensive considering the research objectives.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative methods, used as a tool to explore students of English's learning motivations are not sufficient. Instead, tracking and observing students' dynamic motivation, which can record the changing of their English learning motivation would provide more insightful information on learning motivation, since motivation typically changes with different conditions and times.

Conclusion

The current study explored the L2 learning experience of male and female Chinese graduate students in a Chinese university. The findings provided empirical data that could provide graduate students with appropriate support to inspire their motivation toward English language learning, both for male and female postgraduate students. Based on the findings of L2 learning differences among postgraduate students, more teaching strategies are suggested to improve postgraduate students' motivation and English proficiency based on the gender difference. Individual difference is crucial in order to utilize second language learning motivational theory. Gender differences should be given all the necessary attention, in order to achieve inspire their learning motivation.

Furthermore, the findings could help lead more educators and researchers towards a higher level of attention to second language acquisition within the Chinese educational context. The findings indicated that the Chinese educational system has been oriented by a "teacher-centered" approach or

exam-oriented system, which ignores the importance of inspiring and motivating students in English learning. Thus, educators and researchers should pay more attention to second language acquisition in the Chinese educational context instead of overly focusing their attention on the students' grades. Administrators should better understand English teaching and learning and boost the "learner-centered" approach implementation.

As for further research recommendations, more research and studies are required in this field. Namely, Chinese postgraduate students' English learning motivation to explore and examine within the theoretical framework of L2MSS deserve detailed investigation. The variables between Chinese postgraduate students and English learning motivation do not only involve gender, there are other variables such as learning anxiety, learning strategies, motivation types, etc. Therefore, further research should explore this area with different variables, in order to fully understand the learning motivation among Chinese postgraduate students.

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